

ORGANIC GARDENING

What is It? The Basics

At no other time in man's existence have we realized how fragile our Earth is. Our atmosphere is warming, changing life, and land on a global scale. Our resources are diminishing, and the resources we do have are abused and stressed. In our rush toward a life of convenience, we pollute the very place we want to enjoy, our home and community. Even the plastic bottled water in our hand is now known to 'leak' chemicals into the water over time. Yikes! "But life is a rush, how do I change?"

You can change the way you live. Mind you, it takes changing that hardest of all things—our habits. But, it can be done and with great satisfaction. Living organically, and therefore more healthful, is simple, inexpensive and has so many benefits, which once started, you'll never go back.

Organic gardening solves many of the issues of organic living by growing food without synthetic fertilizers, naturally building the fertility of the soil and eliminating the persistent synthetic pesticides in the environment. Organic gardening extends to lawn care, landscape design, landscape maintenance, and energy conservation. When you can do these things with benefit to you, the environment and your community, the term becomes Sustainable Living. This is the gold ring humanity must snatch if we want a long term future on Earth.

Closer to home, you will reap the rewards of gardening organically by building rich, fertile, living soil that will grow almost anything. Also you will harvest healthier, more nutritious, and tastier fruits and vegetables. You will provide a great habitat for wildlife that benefits both you and our wild friends. Instead of using so many resources in the community, organic gardening helps contribute to reuse and replenishment of resources. Saving money is always a big benefit, since you will be making your own fertilizer, and soil. And growing your own food is cheap.

Probably the greatest fun will be passing on a healthful, responsible style of living to your family and community.

Soil: To get an idea of what an ideal organic soil is like, let's take a hike. Standing in a deep, moist woodland, take a seat on a mossy log and reach down and pull back some moss and leaves. Scoop up a handful of soil and take a good look. Notice the black-brown soil, the coffee ground texture, the bits of twigs, and leaves, the insects and the earthy smell. It's so loose, you don't need a shovel to move it around. If looked at under a microscope you would be amazed to see it's alive. Billions of microorganisms busy breaking down all that organic matter for use by the surrounding trees. In fact, in a teaspoon of soil there are more microorganisms—bacteria, fungi, etc. than there are people living on our planet. As they break down the organic matter, they release nutrients for plant use, improve the soil structure, fend off disease causing organisms, and buffer the soil against sudden swings in temperature and moisture. Here is how you can get this kind of soil in any part of the yard:

1. Learn the basics of soil structure, nutrition, minerals, pH, and drainage. At the end of this article is a list of resources. Or there are a few great organic gardening books that cover the whole topic.
2. Get your soil tested. Take a soil sample in each area of your yard supporting a unique crop, plant or use.

3. Start Composting. That means pick a place to start piling leaves, grass and other green stuff to rot away. Keep reading to find the section on composting. The addition of composted materials to your yards soil is the fuel for all those microorganisms to build an organic soil. There are also organic fertilizers, soil amendments and 'teas' that help things along.
4. Stop using synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. This is a must. These materials break the natural cycles of life in the gardens by by-passing the soil and natural systems and working just on the plants for a short period of time. [See Oakland's long list of organic pest control products and fertilizers.](#)
5. Collect rainwater and use it instead of city water or well water. City water is expensive and well water can have many minerals in it that change the nutrient balance of the soil.
6. Don't make plant beds with preservative treated wood. There are risks of chemicals leaching into the ground.
7. Buy and use locally sourced materials and plants whenever possible. You will support local companies and avoid using products that used a lot of fuel to get to this market.
8. Manage the whole yard organically, not just the vegetable garden. The veggie garden is a great place to start though. Then tackle the lawn, by far the biggest contributor of toxic waste runoff from urban areas. Then move to the paths, shrubs and trees.

Managing Weeds: This is the biggest obstacle to many would-be organic gardeners. Good organic weed control products are finally starting to make it on to the retail market. It will take a little experimenting to see which ones fit your gardening style, though. Otherwise, combating weeds in the landscape setting calls for foresight, a good strategy, and some sweat.

The best way to control weeds is by smothering them! By denying weed seeds the light and air they need to germinate, many weeds can be eliminated through mulching. This has the secondary benefit of limiting soil moisture loss, and with many mulches building in organic matter into the soil. Then there is hoeing, cultivating, hand weeding, and the use of heat in the form of a flame weeder. You'll have to get on the internet to find one of these things though.

Natural Pest Control: No synthetic pesticides. Period. Fortunately, there is a growing list of natural pest control products to control large outbreaks of pests and disease. In addition there are plenty books articles, websites, and blogs to educate the consumer. The hard part is to stop that easy habit of reaching for the harsh pesticides, and instead, using strategies to naturally control these problems. Instead of spraying, pick those caterpillars off the Mugo Pine. Instead of applying fungicides to the lawn, water in the morning instead of evening so the lawn can dry out. And by enriching the garden soil with compost, many garden pests go away, because the plant is better able to fend for itself. The key is to be conscious of how you're growing the plant and know the strategies for dealing with the most common problems. Lots of resources abound, including the ones at the end of this article.

Natural pest control doesn't just come in a bottle. There are plenty of home remedies to combat pests and diseases. Cultural methods are more

important though, like proper watering, companion crops, avoiding over-fertilizing, and planting the right plant in the right place. Exclusion with netting or fencing is the rock solid way of avoiding damage by deer, rabbits, and birds. Scouting frequently for problems can keep small pest infestations small and experimenting with beneficial insects and fungi reduces pests to tolerable levels.

Remember, in organic gardening, insects are welcome and part of the natural component of the living garden.

Stewardship of the Environment: By gardening in a healthful way, you become part of the bounty of the natural world. The goal of proper organic gardening is that the sum of the gains is greater than the parts, and the environment is better off we are better off and the community as a whole is better off. If all Americans were aware of the millions of tons of pesticides and fertilizers polluting our groundwater, waterways and soils, they would be appalled. But it occurs an ounce at a time, a pound here, a yard there.

It's a great time to change our ways. Organic methods can restore soils, attract native creatures back to your yard and promote the use and reuse of locally made and grown items where you live.

LEARN MORE; Here's a tiny sampling of informative and entertaining organic gardening sites and publications.

WEBSITES:

OHIOLINE.OSU.EDU, Great fact sheet series on all things yard and garden

GARDENSIMPLY.COM, Website for excellent organic gardening information.

ORGANICGARDENING.COM

ORGANIC-GARDENING.NET

ORGANICGARDENINGGURU.COM Fun site with good content.

BOOKS:

[The Gardening A-Z Guide to Growing Organic](#), Tanya L.K. Deanckla 2003 Story Publishing.

[The Backyard Homestead](#), Carleen Madigan 2009 Story Publishing.

[Rodales III. Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening](#), Pauline Deans 2002 Rodale Press. *The standard for Organic Gardening information.*

[The Family Kitchen Garden](#), Liebrich, Wagner, and Wendland. *A wonderful book on getting kids interested in gardening and preparing the food they grow.*

[Let it Rot](#), Stu Campbell, 1998 Story Publishing. *Good Composting book.*

[The City Gardeners Handbook](#), Linda Yang 2002 Story Publishing. *No yard is too small for growing. Great cross reference for making best use of space.*